DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 263 SP 031 684

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TITLE An Integrated Approach to the Training of Early Primary Teachers. A Summary of the Report on the Follow-Up Evaluation of the Early Primary Project.
PUB DATE Nov 88
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Early Childhood Education; *Experiential Learning; Followup Studies; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Preservice Teacher Education; Program Effectiveness; *Program Evaluation; Student Teaching
IDENTIFIERS Ontario (Kingston)

ABSTRACT

The Early Primary Project, initiated in Queen's University, Ontario, Canada in 1985, differed from the regular teacher education program in five ways: (1) all practice teaching in the first half of the year was assigned at the early primary level and was supervised by project faculty; (2) the first practice teaching was an extended round of 7 weeks duration in a single classroom instead of two rounds of 2 weeks each; (3) the associate teachers who worked with project students were selected for their knowledge and implementation of government guidelines that mandated the experiential approach to the teaching of young children; (4) all of the students took their language arts course with a project faculty member; and (5) designated times were established for discussion of project concerns, for social occasions, and for enrichment activities involving special speakers and seminars. This report summarizes the results of a followup study in which 15 graduates of the project, now teaching, were observed and interviewed to determine the effectiveness of the project in training teachers and to ascertain whether the teachers maintained the impact of the project experience in their classroom. (JD)

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AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THE TRAINING OF EARLY PRIMARY TEACHERS

A SUMMARY OF THE REPORT ON THE

FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION OF THE EARLY PRIMARY PROJECT

November 1988

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AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THE TRAINING OF EARLY PRIMARY TEACHERS

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FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION OF THE EARLY PRIMARY PROJECT

BACKGROUND

The Faculty of Education at Queen's University initiated the Early Primary Project in September, 1985. The Project addressed the dual concerns of providing the province of Ontario with more teachers specializing in early primary education and giving a group of students, with demonstrated interest in the area, a chance to increase their experience beyond that offered in the regular Bachelor of Education program. The first class comprised fifteen students; the second, twenty-eight and enrolment has been held at about that level for all subsequent classes. Selection for the project was based on a demonstrated interest in early childhood education.

The Early Primary Project differed from the regular teacher education program in five ways. First, all practice teaching in the first half of the year was assigned at the early primary level and was supervised by project faculty.

Second, this first practice teaching was an extended round of seven weeks duration in a single classroom instead of two rounds of two weeks each. (During the second half of the year, the project students had two weeks of practice teaching at the primary level and two weeks at the junior level in the same manner as the comparison students. Comparison students were enrolled in the regular teacher education program at the primary/junior level.)

Third, the associate teachers chosen to work with the project students were selected for their knowledge and implementation of the Ontario Ministry of Education Guidelines that mandated the experiential approach to the teaching of young children. These teachers had been observed in their classrooms by project faculty and many of them had been involved in courses given by the project faculty. The selection of the associate teachers was particularly important to guarantee that the students had the opportunity to observe and practise in their teaching placements the approach that they were discussing in their classes at the faculty.

Fourth, all of the students took their language arts course with a project faculty member. Care was taken that theory should

complement the practice of the teaching experience. Optional courses were arranged with a special focus on early childhood methods and philosophy.

Fifth, communication between and among students, faculty and associates was nurtured by the establishment of designated times for discussion of project concerns, for social occasions and for enrichment of studies by special speakers and seminars.

During the second year of the project a program evaluation was conducted involving both project and comparison students who were observed and interviewed twice during the course of their teacher education year. The evaluation concluded that the Early Primary Project did make a positive difference in the knowledge and skill development of the student teachers.

PURPOSE

This follow-up study grew out of a desire to know whether the impact of the project experience would be maintained when the student teachers became teachers in their own classrooms. Each of the questions that had been investigated during the initial program evaluation was included in the follow-up evaluation and some additional ones were posed. The questions included: How effective is the project approach for training early primary teachers? How important is the associate and the classroom to the development of the teacher? Is the seven week practicum beneficial? How important are previous experience and previous education in explaining the performance of the teacher? Which classroom characteristics are the ones most likely to produce a positive learning environment? In addition, some information was sought about the actual process of the integration of the teacher at the board, school and classroom levels.

SAMPLE

All project and comparison students (now teachers) who were teaching in a situation that included responsibility for both program and a classroom environment were included in the study. Teachers who were supply teaching, or who were teaching outside Canada were not included. Teachers who had program responsibility but only limited responsibility for or access to their own classrooms were interviewed but not observed.

Fifteen project teachers and ten comparison teachers were observed in their classrooms and interviewed. Two project teachers and two comparison teachers were interviewed only.
In addition, interviews were conducted with twenty-two principals of the first year teachers.

INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The classroom data collection instrument was the same scale that was used in the initial evaluation. The instrument was created by project faculty and was based on the Ontario Ministry guidelines that mandated an experiential approach and that formed the theoretical underpinnings of the project (Fowler, 1989). It utilized a four point scale on each of fifty-one items, including a "global" or overall rating of each classroom as well as an examination of the resources in the classroom, the physical layout, the experiences provided for the students and teacher characteristics. A brief interview was conducted with available principals and a more extended one with each of the first year teachers.

Data were collected from the last week of April to the second week of June. The project faculty were interested in seeing project and comparison students under regular teaching circumstances and in classes that had been operating for a number of months.

DATA ANALYSES AND RESULTS

The statistical procedures applied to the numerical data from the rating scale included the use of descriptive statistics, correlation coefficients, multiple regression and factor analysis. Content analysis was performed on the interview data.

Question One. How effective is the project approach for training early primary teachers?
Descriptive statistics calculated from the items on the rating scale were used to compare the classrooms (both globally and on specific characteristics) and the behaviour of project and comparison teachers. On the global classroom measure, where a 4 indicated most congruent with the experiential approach guidelines and a 1 was least congruent, the project teachers averaged 3.3 with a standard deviation of .72 while the comparison teachers averaged 2.0 with a standard deviation of .94. Thus, the project teachers had set up environments that were more congruent with the guidelines than had non-project teachers. There was also less variability in the project classrooms in terms of their match with the guidelines than there was in the non-project ones.

During practice teaching the project teachers had been placed in classrooms that scored 3.8 in the first round (the handpicked round) and 2.3 in the second round. The classrooms of the comparison students had scored 2.1 and 2.3. Thus, the classrooms set up by the project teachers, while not as congruent with experiential approach guidelines as the handpicked ones in which they were placed were much more so than the ones in which they were randomly placed. The classrooms of the comparison students were about the same as the ones in which they had practice

taught.

It is clear from the data that the knowledge and skills developed in their extended round of practice teaching were of most use to the project teachers when they set up their own classrooms in varying school contexts. Other items measuring the use of experiential learning strategies, the integration of play into the classroom, and the qualities of good listening and speaking demonstrated by the teacher all indicated the project teachers were different from their non-project colleagues, though both groups were perceived to be effective. Interview data confirmed these findings and emphasized the knowledge, skills and confidence of the project teachers.

Question Two. How important is the associate and the classroom to the development of the teacher?
Regression analysis was used to estimate the impact of the associate and the classroom on the first year teacher's behaviour with a "global" classroom measure used as the basis of the comparison between project and non-project classrooms. The regression equation used this measure of the first year classroom as the criterion variable and the same measure obtained during the two rounds of practice teaching as the predictors. About fifty-four percent of the variability in the classrooms established by the first year teachers was accounted for by the experience they had gained in their practice teaching. This affirms the importance of the practice teaching component.

In this equation, however, only the amount of variability accounted for by the first round of practice teaching can be considered significant ($t=4.63$, $p.<.001$). Thus the first round of practice teaching (in the hand-picked classrooms for the project teachers) is the one that had the impact on the classrooms that were subsequently established.

Interview data (from both the teachers and their principals) supported the conclusions drawn from the regression analysis. A majority of the project teachers indicated that the first practicum had been critical preparation when they went to establish their own classrooms. It can be concluded that when a teacher has had significant experience in a classroom during teacher preparation that is congruent with the experiential approach guidelines, that teacher is more likely to have the knowledge and confidence to set up such an experiential classroom during the first year of teaching.

Question Three. Is the seven week practicum beneficial?
Since the extended practicum could not be separated from the associate and classroom (question two), all data used to answer this question specifically were found in the interviews conducted with project teachers, comparison teachers and principals.

A majority of project teachers felt that the practicum was a critical part of their teacher preparation. Specifically, they

had opportunities to observe students over time and to plan and implement complete units of study. Nearly one half of the comparison teachers thought a longer practicum would be an improvement in training; only a third had thought so after practice teaching. Both sets of principals commented on the desirability of extended practical experience.

Question Four. How important are previous experience and previous education in explaining the performance of the teacher? Previous experience was defined as experience that the teacher candidate had had in a classroom setting prior to training and previous education meant a degree or certificate with a significant component of courses in early childhood studies.

The correlations among teacher behaviour, global class measure, related degree and previous experience were examined. The correlations of related degree and previous experience with teacher behaviour were about the same in the two rounds of practice teaching and in the first year teacher's classroom (.3 and .4). The correlations of related degree and previous experience with global class measure were higher in the first year teacher's classroom than in either of the rounds of practice teaching (.5 from .2 and .3).

Regression analysis was used to examine further the impact of related degree and previous classroom experience. Thirty-two percent of the variability in the classrooms set up by the first year teachers was accounted for by the factors of previous experience and related degree; only related degree can be considered significant, however ($t=2.54$, $p.<.05$). Twenty-four percent of the variability in teacher behaviour (as measured by Item 6: Does the teacher accept as basic and demonstrate by his/her methodology that meaningful and lasting learning is based on experience?) was accounted for by the two factors of related degree and previous experience; once again only related degree was significant ($t=2.20$, $p.<05$). During the first practice teaching round ten percent of the variability in teacher behaviour was accounted for by these factors and in the second round of practice teaching eighteen percent was accounted for. Neither of these two percentages was statistically significant at the .05 level.

From this data it was possible to conclude that related degree and previous experience become more important when teacher candidates are in less supportive classrooms or are in their own classrooms. Of the two criteria for selection into the program, related degree seems to be the most relevant.

Question Five. Which classroom characteristics are the ones most likely to produce a positive learning environment?
The characteristics which produced the classrooms most congruent with the experiential approach guidelines in the original study were monitored in the classrooms of the first year teachers to see if they were being implemented. Regression analysis was used

to examine the impact of the various combinations of factors.

In all cases, the global class measure was used as the criterion variable. In the first model the predictor variables were: a caring and accepting teacher; the use of the arts to foster imagination; the opportunity to acquire the social skills of group work; opportunities for pupils to plan their own learning and decisions of curriculum based on student needs. This model accounted for eighty-four percent of the variability in the classroom measure.

The second model replaced curriculum decisions based on student need and the use of the arts with the presence of hands-on learning materials and opportunities for success for each student; this model accounted for eighty eight percent of the variability in the classroom measure.

Once again, it was noted that the characteristics that help to explain the variability in a successful experiential classroom revolve around the principles of learner independence, learner cooperation and learner security. The descriptive statistics indicated that the project teachers were establishing such classroom environments to a greater degree than the comparison teachers.

Additional Questions. The rest of the questions dealt with the integration of the first year teacher into the new teaching situation. All data collected were interview based and the responses ranged widely depending on the particular situation. Generally, teachers were excited about being in their own classrooms. Many felt they needed more guidance in establishing class routines, making plans especially long range ones, writing report cards, reading core and curriculum documents, preparing for the first day of school, and transforming a bare room into a learning environment.

The most useful kind of help received by novice teachers came from friendly, informed colleagues. Some kind of mentor system is a useful strategy for assisting the novice teacher.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the initial study were supportive of the Early Primary Project as a method of training early primary teachers. This follow-up study confirms the efficacy of the Early Primary Project from the perspective of impact on the classrooms and behaviour of first year teachers.

Reference

Fowler, F.J. (1989). Self-evaluation questionnaire for teachers. Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.